Top 10 Usability Recommendations for Statewide Websites

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Abstract

This article summarizes the NTAP training on Usability Issues in Content Development held in October 2003. This top 10 list is based on user studies that the Usability Testing and Evaluation Center (UTEC) team conducted for the Illinois Technology Center for Law and the Public Interest (ITC). The user studies were conducted in a formal usability lab setting as well as in the field at legal aid offices and private law firms.

In this article we describe usability recommendations for the following:
- General guidelines for state wide websites
- Recommendations for public websites
- Recommendations for advocate websites

Immediately following the guidelines and recommendations, we point to the website links that illustrate and apply the concepts. We hope that you find these recommendations and applications useful in your website development.

General Guidelines for statewide web sites.

The following guidelines are heuristics (rules of thumb) for any website development and should be considered for state wide website design and development.

1. *Feature a Robust Search Engine*

- Display your search engine prominently on the Homepage. Include a robust search function that is text-based and not query-based or exact word string match. Search engine parameters should allow the search function to trawl the entire site. http://www.illinoislegalaid.org/ or http:illinoislawhelp.org/

- Provide user with tips on how to change their search rather than just displaying 'no results' message. Clear search criteria after each search. http://www.itcweb.org/option3/GM_search.html

- For attorneys, use a search engine interface that resembles that of Lexis-Nexis or Westlaw. Doing so will provide lawyers with an interface design they are already familiar with. http://www.illinoislegalaid.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=search.advancedSearch

2. *Chunk Content*

- Minimize scrolling, especially for the public website. When content is extensive, chunk the information into smaller pieces under subheadings and use a Table of Contents in the front of a long document. http://www.illinoislegalaid.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.dsp_content&contentID=276 and http://www.illinoislawhelp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.dsp_content&contentID=1414 or http://www.illinoislawhelp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.dsp_content&contentID=1440

3. *Use a Consistent Layout*

- Use consistent layout of categories throughout all the sublevel pages. Repeat a list of categories in exactly the same order.

  BEFORE: The three features on the public website homepage, "Find Legal Information", "Find a Lawyer", and "Find Information on Most Common Problems", rotated positions on sublevel pages at various times so that one was more prominently placed than the other two, which was confusing to users: http://www.illinoislawhelp.org/index.cfm, http://www.illinoislawhelp.org/index.cfm?featurehome=findLawyer and http://www.illinoislawhelp.org/index.cfm?featurehome=commonProblems

  AFTER: The redesigned homepage eliminates that confusion by removing the three functions from the homepage. These features are now all accessed by drilling down through a practice area:

http://dev.illinoislawhelp.org/devmikespace/guide_me/GM_home.html
http://dev.illinoislawhelp.org/devmikespace/guide_me/GM_housing.html and
http://dev.illinoislawhelp.org/devmikespace/guide_me/GM_landlord.html

- List practice areas in the same order throughout the site. Here in the left hand navigation area and in the tabbed navigation:
http://www.illinoislegalaid.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.practiceAreasList

4. *Don't Strand Users*

- When users are going to an offsite website, make the new website pop up in a new smaller window, and make sure you tell users that they are leaving your website and how to return to your website.
http://www.illinoislawhelp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.dsp_ProSeListContent&p_area=53&pCode=120&L2pCode=181 (click on 'Illinois Attorney General's Consumer Protection Information')

- Provide comprehensive, easy to locate resource links to other web sites, and make sure you tell users that they are leaving your website and how to return to your website.
http://www.illinoislegalaid.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.dsp_area&p_Area=60#Federal%20Housing%20Programs (click on HUD's Public Housing Occupancy Guidebook)

Recommendations for Public Websites.

In addition to the above general guidelines, the following recommendations should be considered when designing and developing websites for the public and for clients.

5. *Prominently Display Vital Functions*

- Make sure all functions and buttons vital to the site appear on the homepage without scrolling.

    BEFORE: At 800x600 screen resolution the 'Find' button in the Find a Lawyer function was below the screen and required scrolling to see.
    http://www.illinoislawhelp.org/

    AFTER: No scrolling on homepage. The 'Find a Lawyer' function is accessed on interior pages.   http://www.itcweb.org/option3/

6. *Guide Users to Relevant Information*

- Make homepage navigation simple. When users have too many points of entry into sublevel pages, they may not understand the organization of the site. For example, users did not understand the three categories under which content was

originally organized: Find Legal Information, Find a Lawyer and Find Information on Most Common Problems

BEFORE: www.IllinoisLawHelp.org

AFTER: A single point of entry guides users to the information they are looking for http://www.itcweb.org/option3/

7. *Describe Each Practice Area & Subtopic*

- Display practice areas with a description of each area. Rollovers may work well here to conserve space and make the page look less cluttered.

  BEFORE:
  http://www.illinoislawhelp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.dsp_ProSeArea&p_Area=60
  AFTER: http://www.itcweb.org/option3/GM_housing.html.
  Also http://www.itcweb.org/option3/ (homepage)

Guidelines for Advocate Websites.

In addition to the general guidelines, the following recommendations should be considered when designing and developing websites for legal aid and pro bono advocates.

8. *Use a Design and Navigation Familiar to Attorneys*

- Tab structure is easy to use and thus a good design style. Use an organization and navigation structure familiar to your audience.
  http://www.IllinoisLegalAid.org/

- Use screen space for subject matter content and exclude non-relevant graphics, especially on sublevel pages. For example, on the homepage use screen space to provide current information about events (a calendar feature), but exclude this feature on sublevel pages to increase the screen space for practice area content.
  http://www.IllinoisProBono.org - homepage includes calendar in right side navigation area; sublevel pages are being redesigned so that the calendar disappears and there is more "real estate" for legal content.

- For sublevel pages, use screen space to prominently display the drill down navigation. For example, in the legal aid directory, testing found that lawyers often searched that directory the same way you would use a phone book, searching first by letter for the names of organizations they were familiar with, which is the navigation scheme that is most prominently placed on the top of the page.

http://www.illinoislegalaid.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=organizationDirectory.dspOrganizations

9. *Include "How To" Materials*

- Include "How To" documents, especially in practice areas. These procedures allow lawyers to work in areas they are less familiar with, but want to learn about. http://www.illinoisprobono.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.dsp_content&contentID=1640

10. *Include Links to Statutes and Cases*

- Include links between content and relevant statutes and cases. These links will increase the worth of the information on the site for lawyers. http://www.illinoislegalaid.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.dsp_content&contentID=278 and http://www.illinoislegalaid.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.dsp_content&contentID=375

Conclusion

In websites designed for users seeking information, the information itself is the focus for the site. Before you begin to design and develop a website, be sure to include the content expert on the design team. Then define the target "users" of the site, their level of expertise using the technology, and their purpose for visiting the site.

When you develop the user interface, review and classify the types of information and then design so that the user interface reveals its organization and navigation in a simple, familiar layout.

Finally, user test your content, organization, and user interface to determine the validity of the content as well as the effectiveness of the interface and the information, and to assess the accuracy of the user profile.